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SUBJECT: ASSESSING THE PARAMILITARY PHENOMENON AFTER
DEMOBILIZATIONS

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SUMMARY

[1. \(C\)](#) This is the first in a series of cables focusing on the paramilitary phenomenon in the latter stages of demobilization. Poloffs have discussed with Colombian politicians, academics, and social leaders in Bogota, Medellin and Barranquilla how paramilitaries will evolve as their ranks shrink. Assessments vary widely. To date, over 14,000 of the estimated 25,000 paramilitaries have demobilized. Most of the AUC's centralized military structure has been dismantled and nearly all the top paramilitary chiefs have stepped down. (See ref A for detailed breakdown). The benefits to the country are obvious. The homicide rate hit an 18-year low in 2005. While most demobilized paramilitaries have returned to their communities, a minority remain involved in criminal activity or may be attempting to influence politics. This minority, concentrated in northern departments, roughly consists of those that: never demobilized; regrouped to form criminal gangs; or joined the ranks of new or existing criminal organizations to fill the vacuum left by demobilized blocs. Moreover, some argue that demobilization has enabled paramilitary leaders to transition from illegal combatants to legal citizens, giving them greater latitude to participate in local and national politics, including upcoming Congressional elections. The most effective remedy remains rigorous reinsertion and verification programs to fully integrate these individuals into society and ensure the dismantlement of these illegal criminal structures. End Summary.

22,000 ILLEGAL ARMED COMBATANTS HAVE DEMOBILIZED SINCE 2002

¶2. (C) President Uribe's success in demobilizing over 22,000 illegal combatants is a significant accomplishment. Since the GOC and the United Self Defense Forces (AUC) signed the Agreement of Santa fe de Ralito in July 2003, over 14,000 of the estimated 25,000 paramilitaries have demobilized (the estimate of the total number of paramilitaries has increased because the original number did not include the AUC's urban militia and support networks). In addition to the dismantlement of most of the AUC's centralized military structure, nearly all of the top paramilitary chiefs have stepped down, such as Vicente Castano; Salvatore Mancuso; Ivan Roberto Duque, AKA "Ernesto Baez;" Diego Murillo AKA "Don Berna;" and Carlos Mario Jimenez, AKA "Macaco."

¶3. (C) According to Peace Commissioner Luis Carlos Restrepo, the groups expected to demobilize before mid-February 2006 are the Central Bolivar Bloc (BCB) with 3,000 members, the Mineros Bloc with 2,000 members (already underway), the Self-Defense Mid-Magdalena Bloc with 650, and the Elmer Cardenas Bloc with 500 members. Restrepo was less hopeful about the demobilization of the Northern Bloc, lead by "Jorge 40"; regional pressures and the security situation could delay matters. In addition, over 8,000 illegal armed combatants have deserted since August 2002. About half are from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). See ref A for complete breakdown of the GOC's collective (group) demobilization efforts as of December 23, 2005 and of the individual deserter program.

¶4. (U) The benefits from removing 22,000 from the battlefield are clear. According to data from the Security and Democracy Foundation, the homicide rate for every 100,000 people was 38

in 2005, down from 44 and 52 in 2004 and 2003, respectively. In its report on security in 2005, the foundation pointed out that the government's democratic security policy is providing results and that the policy includes "the demobilization of paramilitary groups, whose cease-fire led to a decrease in the homicides committed by these groups." The bottom line is that violence has decreased significantly in the country. The homicide rate is at the lowest level in 18 years. Other violence indicators also show significant downward trends -- kidnappings (down 39%), massacre victims (down 62%), and terror attacks (down 42%).

PARAMILITARIES PRIOR TO DEMOBILIZING

¶5. (C) Understanding the original composition of the paramilitary structures helps envision how they will evolve post-demobilization. Most analysts agree that the paramilitaries can be broken down into three groups:

- a. The "ideologues," or those who banded together to fight the guerrillas;
- b. Private security forces that became organized crime networks; and
- c. Narco-traffickers that became paramilitaries to "legitimize" their criminal enterprises.

¶6. (C) This division explains how some paramilitaries, once demobilized, have an easier time integrating back into society, while others will probably continue participating in illegal activities. Colombian National Police Intelligence (DIPOL) analysts who have followed the paramilitary phenomenon for over a decade estimated that seven to eight percent of the total demobilized combatants, some 2,000 of 25,000 fighters, are likely to continue their illegal activities. This estimate is based in part on DIPOL's current figures, which show that 247 former paramilitaries have been arrested for committing crimes after demobilizing; 129 have been murdered and 27 have been wounded while participating in criminal activities; and over 1,000 still participate in illicit activities who have managed to escape capture.

PARAMILITARIES AT PRESENT

17. (C) Most demobilized paramilitaries have dismantled their organizational structures and the majority have returned to their places of origin, according to the Organization of American States (OAS) Verification Mission in Colombia report (please treat as close hold since the report has not yet been made public). However, OAS officials have expressed concern about the following post-demobilization phenomena:

-- a. the regrouping of demobilized combatants into criminal gangs that seek control over communities and illicit economic activity;

-- b. groups that have not demobilized; and

-- c. the appearance of new armed players and/or the strengthening of those already in existence in zones abandoned by demobilized groups.

a. REGROUPING OF DEMOBILIZED GROUPS

(C) According to the OAS Verification Mission report, in regions where guerrilla influence is minimal and the control of government authorities has not yet taken hold, individual demobilized mid-level paramilitary leaders are reasserting their presence. In these places, paramilitary sub-groups (of approximately 5 to 30 members) are moving into criminal activities, such as extortion, drugs, intimidation, and "social cleansing," previously run by active paramilitary

blocs. These paramilitary sub-groups though significantly smaller than the larger paramilitary structures are found in the municipality of Palmito, Sucre Department (under the influence of the former Heroes Montes de Maria Bloc); the municipality of Montelibano, Cordoba Department (under the influence of the former Sin and San Jorge Blocs); Puerto Gaitan, Meta Department (under the influence of the former Self Defense Peasants of Meta and Vichada); Buenaventura, Valle de Cauca Department (under the influence of the former Calima Bloc); and in Tumaco, Narino Department (under the influence of the former Libertadores del Sur Bloc.)

b. GROUPS THAT HAVE NOT DEMOBILIZED

(C) These groups are sub-units of demobilized blocs that refused to demobilize and continue to carry out criminal activities in their zones of influence. For example, in Tierralta, Cordoba Department, following the demobilization of the Heroes de Tolova Bloc, a faction known as the "Traquetos" continues operating in the area. This group protects illegal cultivation and controls the coca paste trade in the zone. In Puerto Gaitan, Meta Department, a self-defense group of the Vichada Front of the Central Bolivar Bloc (BCB) did not demobilize and now fights over extortion opportunities and control of illicit cultivation in that sector. In Sucre Department, a group under the command of Rodrigo Mercado alias "Rodrigo Cadena," Golfo de Morrosquillo Front, never demobilized. DIPOL analysts expect that some blocs, such as the Self-Defense Groups of Campesinos del Casanare, Heroes del Llano, and Heroes del Guaviare, will never demobilize, and will have to be dealt with by police or military action.

c. APPEARANCE OF OLD/NEW ARMED PLAYERS IN ZONES ABANDONED BY DEMOBILIZED GROUPS

(C) The OAS Mission has observed cases of criminals establishing themselves in areas once ruled by paramilitaries and recruiting new combatants, especially in places where a vibrant illegal economy already exists. For example, OAS officials have been advised of drug trafficking groups forming in the north of Valle del Cauca and Choco Departments. Diego Montoya and Wilber Varela, the main cartel leaders, are acquiring weapons and recruiting combatants among the demobilized and civilian populations. In Narino Department, a group known as the "Mano Negra" (Black Hand) or "Aguilas Negras" (Black Eagles) operates

where the Libertadores del Sur Bloc used to reign and is trying to gain a monopoly over the purchase of coca. A similar phenomenon is evident in Norte de Santander Department, where a group that calls itself "Aguilas Azules" (Blue Eagles) pressures the demobilized of the former Catatumbo Bloc who reside in the zone, with the result that some demobilized have been assassinated or displaced. These new criminal groups also will have to be dealt with through police or military action.

FUTURE PARAMILITARY INFLUENCE UNAVOIDABLE?

18. (C) The strength of paramilitary organizations in the past was based on the demands for security from citizens in areas with a weak government presence. This still resonates with the Colombian public. According to the most recent Cid-Gallup poll, the AUC has a 13 percent favorable rating (one in 8 Colombians), versus 5 percent for the FARC, and 2 percent for the ELN. This suggests there are significant challenges to completely eliminating paramilitary influence in these areas. According to Semana Magazine security editor Marta Ruiz, who has written about these issues for several years, as long as the State fails to improve its local institutions, in particular law enforcement and courts, the demand for do-it-yourself justice will continue. Researcher Gustavo Duncan argues that Colombian citizens' need for "mafia-like security organizations" undermines the State. He noted a dichotomy between urban demands for democratic principles and modern capitalism, and rural demands for the responsiveness to immediate security and economic needs that

criminal organizations are better positioned to provide. For example, there have been several instances of local communities blocking paramilitary demobilizations because they were afraid the FARC would return. Some analysts warn that most communities prefer AUC over FARC presence since the guerrillas are a violent indoctrinating force while the AUC is seen as a corrupt political machine that brought a measure of stability and dispute resolution.

19. (C) The demobilization process has allowed paramilitaries, particularly among the leadership, to change their status from illegal combatants to legal citizens, potentially giving them greater latitude to participate openly in local and national politics. This in turn, could improve their ability to protect criminal activity, according to some analysts. Ideas for Peace Foundation President Camilo Gonzalez Pozo has stated that the paramilitaries' economic power permitted them in the past years to better position themselves politically, which will allow them in the coming years to protect their financial and legal interests. Gonzalez described the paramilitaries as essentially "well-oiled mafias" whose main objective was to achieve a monopoly over a set of profitable economic activities, such as wholesale food markets, racketeering, drug trafficking, and eventually significant political power at the local and national level.

110. (C) AUC leader, AKA "Ernesto Baez," in an El Tiempo article in July 2005 claimed that for several years, the paramilitaries have intervened in politics, penetrated local and regional political processes, and built political structures. Columnist and paramilitary analyst Claudia Lopez, who has written extensively on paramilitary political influence on the Atlantic Coast, agreed. Lopez showed that since 1997 the paramilitaries have tried to gain influence at all levels of government to legalize their status. She explained that in the last national and local elections, the paramilitaries, strategy was to buy support by backing politicians who were likely to win and willing to represent their needs. This strategy of supporting any politician -- notwithstanding their party association -- allowed them to further spread their influence. In an interview with Semana Magazine in June 2005, paramilitary leader Vicente Castano said that 35 percent of the National Congress consists of paramilitary "friends," and that "by the next election, (the paramilitaries) will have increased that percentage" (see ref

B and C). This figure may be fact or boast. Senator and pre-presidential Polo Democratico candidate Antonio Navarro Wolf has suggested that only seven senators solidly support the paramilitaries with others occasionally supportive or intimidated to be supportive. (Navarro Wolf himself has been accused of accepting campaign contributions from narco-traffickers so he is not a disinterested observer.) The involvement of paramilitary supporters in the elections, and intimidation of candidates and voters by the paramilitary themselves, is a hot topic, with both Liberal and centrist parties acting to distance themselves from paramilitary influence (septel).

A SNAPSHOT OF PARAMILITARY INFLUENCE

MEDELLIN

¶11. (C) Poloff visited Medellin in mid-December and met with several leading figures to discuss the local influence of former paramilitaries (see ref D). According to Mayor Sergio Fajardo, the structure of the urban-armed conflict in the city is complex and involves guerrillas and paramilitaries as well as youth gangs and bands of common criminals regulated by these IAGs. He explained that in the 1980s, Medellin became synonymous with the cocaine trade, and the city had the highest per capita murder rate in the world. However, homicide rates have fallen significantly in recent years in large part because of the handling of the reinsertion of the 868 demobilized paramilitaries from the Cacique Nutibara Bloc. An OAS Mission report in early 2005 noted that the

city's improving homicide rate is directly related to the lower rates of violence found in areas where many demobilized live. Medellin's reinsertion and reintegration model, one of the best in the country, entails close monitoring of the demobilized, psychological assistance, orientation and training, and a monthly subsidy, higher than the national program. Medellin's program funding takes up 0.34 percent of the total municipal budget and has strong political backing. It remains to be seen if the national program, which is responsible for demobilizing over 14,000 combatants, will have the same success as the local program.

¶12. (C) Former Mayor Luis Perez (and likely mayoral candidate in 2009) took a different view, explaining that violence has gone down in Medellin because the AUC controls "everything" unlike before, when the AUC was fighting with guerrillas. Perez argued that demobilized paramilitary chiefs such as "Don Berna" did not fully-demobilize their military structures and still wield significant power in Medellin. He claimed that the AUC has a stranglehold on public transportation, health services, the lottery, and barter-type stores. Labor leaders Carlos Julio Diaz and Jorge Luis Soto pointed to a recent National Administration Department of Statistics of Colombia study that showed residents of Medellin feel more secure today than ever before, but are the most "extorted" in the country. The 2005 annual report from the office of Medellin's human rights ombudsman, noted that paramilitary groups are exerting new authority in some neighborhoods of the city and some demobilized combatants charge "protection taxes." According to a Semana Magazine article in April 2005, the decline in homicides in Medellin is troubling because it may not be in response to a legitimate State restoring peaceful coexistence among the citizenry, but rather a parallel "State" that undermines and weakens democratic institutions.

BARRANQUILLA

¶13. (C) During a December visit to Barranquilla, poloff met with government officials, private sector representatives, and labor union members. According to the Interior Secretary for Atlantico Department, Augusto Garcia, Barranquilla is an important strategic location for criminal groups because it is an industrial city with a maritime port close to the Magdalena River, a corridor utilized by drug traffickers and

the AUC to move coca and weapons. Garcia said Barranquilla, unlike Cali and Medellin, was not the headquarters of any major cartel but used by drug trafficking groups from other parts of the country. However, what some small cartels existed were displaced by the AUC's North Bloc. Garcia, nevertheless, argued that AUC control in the area is minimal compared to other departments on the Atlantic Coast, such as Cordoba, Magdalena, and Sucre.

¶14. (C) According to the President of Barranquilla's private sector association, Arturo Sarabia, many "Barranquilleros" perceive there are ongoing turf battles among "paracos" (paramilitary-narcos), criminals, and gang members who try to pass themselves off as AUC. Sarabia said the AUC's purpose has been to control spaces in the city to operate their illegal businesses. He added that the AUC had some participation in local power, evidenced by the fact that they diverted resources from the health sector and they had a high participation in gambling, especially in the lottery.

¶15. (C) The President of Central Labor Union (CUT) Jesus Tovar said the situation in Barranquilla will continue to be "serious" because no one expects the AUC to stop targeting sectors such as unionists, teachers and students. Tovar claimed that corruption and AUC influence in local politics is growing. He added that labor activists continue to receive threats and intimidation because they have denounced this situation.

COMMENT

¶16. (C) We are still at the beginning of this process, and also at the beginning of the 2006 Congressional and Presidential campaigns. Several political leaders are trying to ensure their candidate lists remain paramilitary-free. Liberal party leader and former president Cesar Gaviria is convinced that the evolution of the paramilitaries is headed in a dangerous direction with the end result being criminal organizations on the scale of the Cali cartel of the 1980s (septel). Others believe he is exaggerating the issue for campaign purposes, and that the Liberal Party has few other issues to challenge President Uribe's strong standing in the polls. The most effective way for the GOC to confront the post-paramilitary period is to ensure that as many demobilized as possible are discouraged from returning to illegal activities. But this requires resources to train and resocialize the ex-paramilitaries. Resources are needed in amounts well beyond the Colombian government's ability. Therefore, international assistance is critical at this time.

Without such assistance the Colombian nightmare of narco-terrorism could be made many years longer. To achieve this in a country where parallel criminal structures have operated for decades, effective reinsertion and verification programs for demobilized combatants are also essential. Inadequate leadership and coordination among GOC institutions is delaying this process, which could undermine the significance of the GOC's successful efforts since 2002 to remove illegal actors from the battlefield.

WOOD